

Stop #3 – Lieutenant James Clark & Corporal Frederick Wildt (Graves 2863 & 2864)

Identifying the dead was a daunting task. Dog tags were not issued by the military at the time, so few Civil War soldiers wore them. In many instances, they were buried in mass graves on the field or had not been buried at all. Some soldiers were fortunate enough to have marked graves, but in many cases residents burned the wooden headboards for fuel before the bodies could be collected. Consequently, about 84% of the remains brought to the Fredericksburg National Cemetery could not be identified.

Rather than furnish individual graves, the Army decided to bury the unknown dead in mass graves. Interring more than one soldier in a grave took less time, money, and space. If every soldier had received his own grave, a thirty acre plot of ground would have been needed to hold them all.

Today, there are 6,794 graves - less than one grave for every two soldiers buried here. Some of these graves hold the remains of up to twelve soldiers. The number of soldiers interred in one grave is denoted by the lower number on the small, flat, square stones (*there is a grave with twelve on the other side of the path just west of Clark and Wildt*).

Occasionally, burial parties would find incomplete information in their attempts to identify the dead. Perhaps only a portion of the soldier's last name or simply their initials would be discernable, and therefore this was transferred to the gravestone here (*example of initials "W.K.F." on stone across path from Clark and Wildt*).

In one instance, the comrades of a New Hampshire soldier included a corked and sealed bottle containing the information of the deceased inside the grave.

In the 1930's, a small stone with the name "Dan" scratched in it was found beside a skeleton on the Chancellorsville battlefield. It was probably placed there by one of the deceased man's friends, who wished to mark the body so that it could be retrieved at a later date. The man never returned, however, or if he did, was not able to find the body. Today "Dan" is one of the over 12,000 unknown soldiers buried in this cemetery.

Thus, there are the 2,643 identified individuals buried here. As we have mentioned, the process for a Civil War soldier to end up in a marked grave at this cemetery is rather miraculous. In the unlikely event someone found and recognized their remains after a battle, a temporary headboard of sorts had to be fashioned, and it then needed to withstand the elements and local scavengers for at least three years.

There are a fair number of soldiers interred here who died in hospitals and camps, thus with an increased probability of being identified. However, the majority perished in combat, such as the two soldiers buried here. (*gesture to Clark's and Wildt's graves*)

Lieutenant James Clark and Corporal Frederick Wildt were both nineteen years old when they left Ann Arbor, Michigan to join Company D of the 4th Michigan Infantry Regiment.

At the Battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862, the 4th Michigan was ordered to assault the Confederate defenses along the Sunken Road at the base of this hill.

Lieutenant James Clark was acting as the regiment's adjutant, urging the men on, as they called out to him to keep down or he would be hit. A Michigander recalled, *"The words were hardly out of his mouth when a musket ball struck poor Jimmy on the third button of his overcoat, glanced to the left, and went directly through him."*

A few moments later, Corporal Frederick Wildt was also hit and killed.

The loss these two quite popular members of the unit hit the regiment hard.

In a letter written immediately after the Battle of Fredericksburg, Major John Randolph of the 4th Michigan, mentioned the death of Corporal Wildt. *"And what shall I say of Fred Wildt? He was one of the best and neatest soldiers in the regiment, ever ready to do his duty, which was always done cheerfully and willingly ... Brave Boy! He, too, has yielded up his young life upon his country's altar."*

Lieutenant Clark was recalled as *"smiling to his comrades and associates ... Kind and affectionate to all, and by his gentlemanly ways he had won the respect and admiration of the entire regiment ... Sleep on brave soldiers and comrades; and while we who are left to fight our battles will revenge your death, sad hearts will be at home. Fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters will mourn your loss."*

Today, Frederick Wildt and James Clark lie side by side in the Fredericksburg National Cemetery. The Chaplain of the regiment originally buried them in separate coffins, the graves marked with carved head boards, in order to find them again if necessary. Four years later a burial party found Clark's and Wildt's graves on a lot near 807 Caroline Street, the current site of the *Made in Virginia* store. The soldiers' remains were exhumed and brought to the national cemetery, where they are now interred here side by side, just as they had stood in the ranks of the 4th Michigan.